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ABSTRACT

With 90 million Americans now reading and writing at the two lowest of five levels of proficiency ("functional" illiteracy by many estimates) according to the 1994 National Education Goals Report, and 30% to 40% of enrolled students in remedial classes, it is past time to determine a "fix" for the greatest national tragedy--"the inability to teach our own language to our own children." Addressed to those who hold "the purse strings to change"--board members, legislators, corporate CEOs, and foundation trustees--this paper submits that those people need to take a close look at the reasons for this indictment. The four major factors which influence what happens between teachers and their students in classrooms throughout the world are: (1) the textbooks used; (2) the manner in which teachers are trained--in attitudes, in methodologies, and in content; (3) the standards by which they are certified; and (4) individual course time requirements at each grade level in accredited schools. These four "sacred cows" are determined by selected groups of state-level bureaucrats. The paper considers statewide textbook adoption and the recent woes of literacy education in California and discusses each of the four factors in detail, supplying much historical background information acquired from many years observing literacy practices. (NKA)

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The Four Sacred Cows in American Education.

by Myrna T. McCulloch

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| Riggs Institute Home Page | Table of Contents | Catalog |

THE FOUR "SACRED COWS" IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

By Myrna McCulloch

[revised and updated February, 2000]

With 90 million American adults now reading and writing at the two lowest of five levels of proficiency -- *functional* illiteracy by many estimates -- according to the 1994 National Education Goals Report, and 30% to 40% of enrolled students in remedial classes, it is now past time to determine a *fix* for our greatest national tragedy -- our inability to teach our own language to our own children! How can this deplorable situation have occurred? Can we stop producing these kinds of results?

This article is addressed to those who hold "the purse strings to change" -- board members, legislators, corporate CEO's, and foundation trustees. Since they empower and fund school systems which, together with publishers, have actually *caused* the illiteracy problem, we submit that they need to take a very close look at the reasons for our indictment.

Locally elected board members are responsible to their constituencies (the taxpayers) for what happens in the public schools yet they have no power to control the main factors involved in the failure. Those who *authorize* public monies (legislators and state boards of education) have taken local control away from elected local boards. Considering the dismal results of our educational system, we think those who fund the sytem now have a compelling need to learn the *root causes* of the present dilemma before continuing to empower those whose reform plans have failed in the past.

Local boards of education are ultimately responsible.

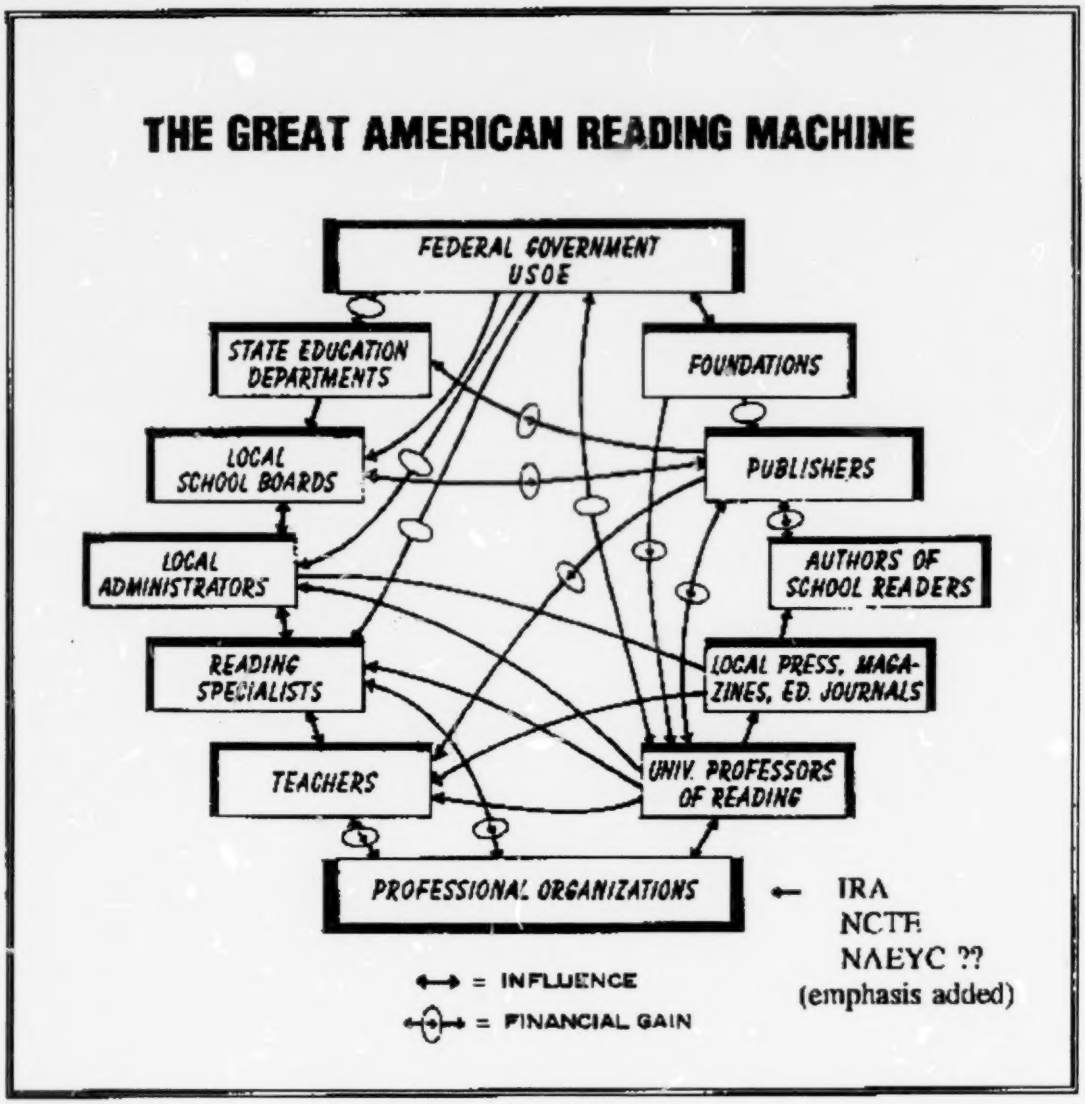
Let me begin by saying that I am not a casual observer on the educational scene. This is written from insights drawn through observations and personal experience gained from approximately 108,000 volunteer hours, since 1972, spent in an attempt to influence improvements in reading and language arts instruction at local, state, and national levels.

My concern and interest began several years before my formal work with The Riggs Institute when our eldest child, a third grader in our local public school in Bellevue, Nebraska, began to have academic problems related to spelling. She would write spelling words which rhymed with those spoken by her teacher and fail her tests though she tested seventh grade level in vocabulary and comprehension. The district tried to insist that she be put into a special education program as "semi- retarded" while other private specialists found that her problem was an intermittent hearing loss caused by environmental allergies. We announced our findings to the district and on the advice of our physician, asked that our daughter be placed in a front row seat, that the teacher make certain she heard instructions and always used the word in a correct sentence. The district refused. They wanted our daughter to be put on what is now known as an IEP (Individualized Education Program) in a special education class. Instead, we

enrolled her in a private school where she experienced no difficulties and also outgrew her allergy problems. I have never forgotten that my husband and I were fortunate to have had that option for her. Far too many parents do not, which is a primary reason I founded The Riggs Institute -- a non profit literacy agency.

Subsequent to this disheartening experience, I served on a reading textbook selection committee for the Bellevue district. Our task was to make a choice among six or seven basal reading programs. One day, a well-fingered and soiled double-spaced copy of a scholarly-looking report was handed to me by the district's curriculum director. Written by a reading professor at the University of Michigan, it made a rather strong case for the various educational practices used in the Houghton-Mifflin basal reading program -- sufficient to nearly cause me to say, "Yes, I guess I do like this one the best." Then I noticed something familiar about the name of the professor who authored it -- a Dr. William K. Durr. Where had I seen this name before? Two days later, it came to me! Sure enough, Dr. Durr, full reading professor in Michigan's state supported system, turns out to be the senior author of the Houghton-Mifflin program. Later, he became president of the International Reading Association. I announced my findings at our next meeting, and I leave it to you to guess how unpopular I became with our district administrators. Apparently they did not want the committee members to know that reading professors could be, and frequently are, financially tied to textbook publishing interests. It seems obvious to me that these administrators must have been involved in this duplicity because they influenced us with Dr. Durr's words, but didn't tell us who he was. If they simply had forgotten to tell us, why were they so angry because we found out?

Many years later, I discovered another and different conflict of interest among reading professors. In Oregon, the local press carried a story about one college of education dean who had been instrumental in the selection of 79 school superintendents over a 20-year period of time. Naive me! At first, I thought this was part of his job description. No, I found he had a personal business going on the side at $5000 per superintendent selected. School districts hired him as a consultant to find superintendents for them. Can you guess who textbook people went to when they wanted to influence these 79 superintendents? The dean didn't even have to author anything -- just become a power broker in the sales game. Later I discovered that nearly all of the 79 superintendents had purchased a well-known "invented" spelling program to add to their curriculum. Could I prove this? Or that one story had anything to do with the other? Of course not! But, a book I read before it went out of print, *The Great American Reading Machine*, by a former reading professor, Dr. David Yarington, influenced my sleuthing instincts for these types of promotional/sales activities and possible conflicts of interest. No, it's not a conspiracy to dumb down America's children; such *moonlighting* simply facilitates opportunities for *"graft, greed, and corruption"* as Dr. Richard Anderson, Director of the Center for the Study of Reading, University of Illinois, so aptly put it when he testified to the California state board in 1988. From Yarington's book, with permission, here is his very revealing graphic:



But, back to my story . . . After the incident with my child, I continued to advocate for better ways to teach reading and spelling, and, in 1976, at the request of a private school administrator, began to research "why these perfectly bright children are not learning to read." My search took me to libraries, including university libraries, where I learned the history of reading methods, how they had evolved, what could be determined through research about successes and failures of various types of programs, and what educators thought about them. I read the scholarly International Reading Association's journals as well as the now infamous *Why Johnny Can't Read* (1955) and *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* (1975) by the late Dr. Rudolph Flesch, and, I think, every reading-related article in between. All of which left me in a state of, "Well, maybe I partly know what's wrong now, but how can it possibly be changed?"

The phonics debate seemed to be a central issue - whether or not we should teach it; if we do teach it, how and when it should be done, etc. I did not find any research, articles, or data relating to WHAT phoneme/grapheme representations needed to be taught. Twenty-three years later, I still see no discussion to define, adequately, the subject of the "great debate." Apparently, it has never been defined in research or otherwise. At least, if it had, one would think that Marilyn Jager-Adams in her otherwise quite

remarkable 1990 *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*, and Dr. Marcy Stein's recent treatise on "decodable texts" would have been able to quote something beyond the 1978 Beck/McCaslin (University of Pittsburgh) simple report on what basal programs were teaching for phonics in 1978. The Beck/McCaslin report was not research as to what phoneme/grapheme were appropriate, which produced better results, etc., but rather just a report on what was being used. I found, and still find this deplorable lack of intellectual curiosity on the part of researchers quite remarkable considering that the phonics issue (should we or shouldn't we?) has been hotly debated since 1955. After lengthy examination of the research, I was unable to report anything definitive about phonics or other reading reform measures which could possibly improve the situation in this small, inner-city school which I had been asked to help.. I delivered my final report to them in that vein. For more background information here, you may want to read, Phonics Is Phonics Is Phonics or Is It?"

The following week, by some quirk of fate perhaps, I met Oma Riggs - my "mentor" for the next 12 years. In a one-hour lecture, she very quickly filled in the gaps in my knowledge bank. She demonstrated the phonetic structure of correct English spelling which, she reported, hadn't been taught at the teacher training level in America since the early 1930's, (shortly after the look-say *Dick and Jane* readers were launched on an unsuspecting public). We ultimately decided to implement the system Miss Riggs had used with great success in Spanish-Harlem classrooms in our own inner city school (see other articles and line graph at: www.riggsinst.org). We also solved teacher training and time-management problems in our school -- the same ones which remain troublesome in nearly every school system even today. In a complete academic turnaround, our first graders ended their first year of this method able to diagram simple sentences, read from the *World Book*, and complete a book report each week -- some up to seven pages long -- all with correct punctuation, spelling, capitalization, grammar, syntax, legible handwriting, spacing, margins, etc. We became ineligible for Title I funding in exactly 2.5 months (using newly trained teachers) after beginning with nearly one-half of the student body in the Title program. It became clear to me that virtually *all* children could learn if they were properly instructed in ways that addressed their "learning style" and if they were quickly taught the phonetic system and rules necessary to write and spell the words in their spoken, comprehensible vocabularies.

In our second year's experience, we deliberately added eighteen "learning disabled" children to our student body, and, with one exception, we brought them all to grade level in self-contained classrooms in that second year. I founded The Riggs Institute at that point in an attempt to share this information with other teachers and parents.

I saw that virtually all children could learn
if they were properly instructed.

Over the past 20 years, through my involvement in publishing, teacher/parent training in effective teaching methods, and my advocacy for high expectations and efficient teacher/student time management, I have reaffirmed over and over that the problems we solved in that small school in Omaha are still the major problems which need to be solved in every school in America. I now call these deterrents to educational reform "the four sacred cows" -- those things we never change, *nor even discuss* -- especially in the press! I believe that the four major factors which influence what happens between teachers and their students in classrooms throughout the world are these:

..... 1) The textbooks used,
..... 2) The manner in which teachers are trained -- in attitudes, in methodologies, and in content,
..... 3) The standards by which they are certified, and
..... 4) Individual course time requirements at each grade level in accredited schools.

These are, in fact, the constraints which prevent any type of true "choice" -- be it vouchers, elective alternative schools, and now even charters -- from making any appreciable difference in student learning. It does little good to move the child and the money from one school to another if the four "cows" are still very much in place. Significantly better teaching and learning do not happen. Newly formed boards are induced to adopt the same types of curriculum, they hire teachers with the same training and certification, and they follow the time management constraints imposed by the states in which they are located.

Recently (1999) an unwise curriculum decision by a founding charter school board member in Texas put in place an ineffective reading program which (the board member said) was chosen "because it was going to be on the state adopted list." She didn't seem to be aware that the Texas legislature approved charters to get these potentially innovative public schools out from under the legal and traditional constraints of the state board and the state department of education where policies have not changed. I predict that soon we will say of the charter idea, "Well, disappointingly, that model school plan sure didn't work," and ready ourselves for the next restructuring idea.

Our four *sacred cow* allegations are not considered pertinent in the restructuring debate. If the U.S. Department of Education is aware of them, it is not apparent. They are ignored at the federal level by poorly advised senate and house education committee members who have enacted legislation to bless the continuing efforts of "scientific researchers" who haven't ever bothered to examine the efficacy of one set of phoneme/graphemes representations (phonics) over another. The federal government's involvement consists of handing even more money to state departments, which allows them to establish greater and greater control over the authority of local boards of education. We need to find out who established the *sacred cows*, and why, before we can think of finding a way to stop this "unwise intrusion into the marketplace."

Who established
the four sacred cows and why?

Contrary to popular belief, the sacred cows were not created by the federal government either directly or through their interference with federally-mandated programs. Nor was it done by local boards of education. These four "sacred cow" policy areas are determined by selected groups of state-level bureaucrats -- state Superintendents of Public Instruction (advised by their staff made up, primarily, of members of the International Reading Association (IRA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC); state Boards of Education (many of whom are appointed rather than elected and who traditionally listen to the recommendations of their hired staff); Teachers' Standards and Practices Commissions; reading professors in Colleges of Education; and, in twenty-one states, state Textbook Commissions -- all, without exception, empowered and funded in their primary jobs, through their respective state legislatures. This is where the teachers' unions are involved; they spend the dues extracted from teachers to influence elections to advance their political view, but, surprisingly, they do not directly affect the selection of curriculum and teacher training like the IRA, NCTE, and NAEYC do.

The results are all about us. In the entire state of Oregon, during the past three language arts textbook adoption processes, The Riggs Institute has been the lone protestor of the textbook adoption process itself. As we've mentioned, Dr. Richard Anderson testified in 1988 to the California Board of Education that

["the process of statewide adoption discourages innovation, limits diversity and reduces local choice. It is subject to abuses, including fraud and bribery. It is vulnerable to ideological fashion. It is expensive and time consuming. Scholars who have studied the statewide adoption process concur that it is an unwise intrusion in the marketplace..."].

Dr. Anderson asked California's State Board of Education to abandon statewide textbook adoptions. We believe that the process itself constitutes an open and clear *opportunity* to violate federal antitrust statutes which were enacted to protect the consumer from unfair monopolies. Textbook adoption forces the taxpayer, parent, teachers, district administrators, and locally-elected board members to have in place materials and methods which are not proven to be safe, much less effective, i.e. the just deposed whole language programs that do not teach "explicit" phonics which is supported by federally-compiled research over "implicit" phonics. I'm not inferring here that there is *nothing* desirable about whole language programs, (they do have the right goals) but that, interestingly, several of these same publishers are now selling . . . .
. . . . . (1) consumable workbooks which are a "visual" means of teaching phonics (by definition, phonics is first sound, then symbol) to 30% of students who are not visually-oriented learners rather than the teacher/student articulated *explicit phonics* instruction supported by federally-compiled research *(Becoming a Nation of Readers, 1985)*,
. . . . . (2) phonemic awareness without graphemic awareness exercises which just produce more invented spellings which, in turn, do not map to standard bookprint for reading, and
. . . . . (3) the dumbed-down "decodable" texts which bring us back, full circle, to worse than *Dick and Jane*. The larger cause for alarm is that now the federal and state legislatures, the public, local board members and teachers all *believe* that our students are getting real phonics. This is nonsense!

The big push for #2 above, "phonemic awareness," (***one*** perfectly valid requirement of reading instruction and even correct spelling) comes to us via Dr. Hallie Yopp, reading professor at California State at Fullerton who is also (surprise, surprise!) senior author of Harcourt Brace. But, while Dr. Yopp is out and about the country "articulating" the 42 sounds of English speech to teachers in her $3000/day moonlighting workshops, her publisher (now the largest US publisher and owner of the the popular standardized testing instrument, the Stanford Nine) is busy printing up consumable "visual" worksheets for the students of these teachers. This constitutes a complete contradiction in pedagogy, an "in-your-face" nose thumbing at the California legislature which has forbidden *invented* spelling, a clear conflict of interest, and therefore, a violation of the public trust, not to mention double-dipping into the public coffers.

And, folks, Dr. Hallie Yopp is surely in the running to become president of the International Reading Association because that's how the system works according to my observations over the past 25 years. In the year 2000, locally-elected board members and schools have virtually no control over textbook selection in twenty-one states which happen to include California and Texas. Though it is true here and there that some larger districts are allowed to "opt out" of the adoption process, in reality, they rarely do; it's simply too much trouble. It makes them unpopular. It means they aren't a team player. A case in point: Iowa is trying to ignore the orchestrated push for state "standards" and is being called nearly "un-American" for this independent decision to put their time, energy, and money into their state-of-the-art ICN classroom network (610 classrooms completely interactive and connected through

fiber optics) which can facilitate a hi-tech and different source of teacher training. Unlike the rest of the nation, busily trying to outdo each other with pie-in-the-sky, unmeasurable "standards," I believe that Iowa has put in place the means of solving at least one of the "cow" problems they undoubtedly recognize -- serious deficiencies in teacher preparation. Iowa thinks they already know WHAT children need to learn (or they trust the local districts to decide), and are trying to produce teachers who are truly qualified to teach. Two or three years ago, I was on a New York City radio talk show. I asked the host and his listeners if they were aware that California and Texas really decide how children in the rest of the country will be taught to read. I explained that because a major reading program costs between $15 -- $25 million to produce, what complies with state department-produced "criteria" (and standards) in California and Texas (a huge portion of the national market) is what other states also get. One might conclude that all 50 states have no real local control because the "in" thing prevails, and **IT** is the only thing which is readily available and well known on any broad scale. It is also what teachers have been trained to do and think, what is talked about and discussed at educational conferences, what is written about in all of the major reading teaching and research journals which are read by the people making the decisions and what is "sold" to and through the media to the public. Most of the journals are owned or endowed by publishing companies or their fostered and/or supported professional organizations, i.e. the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Dare I suggest that they could have a slight conflict of interest?

To illustrate my "only-thing-which-is-well-known" point: In 1994, California's 4th graders tested lowest in the country in reading - below Mississippi, Louisiana, and Guam; in 1998, they came up one step from the bottom, yet California "standards" prevail nearly nationwide. We who teach auditory, visual, verbal and motor cognition at K-1 levels, and both phonemic and graphemic awareness (the latter not included in the California standards) cannot get our materials adopted because these skills are considered "extraneous" to their standards. Their standards look just like their adoption critieria; if one is wrong or missing a few critical things, then the other is also. Check out a few state department websites. See how all of these "standards" and "textbook criteria" framers began (independently?) to think and write almost in tandem practically overnight. Does this have anything to do with the phonics legislation you've heard about across the country? You bet it does! For those of us who have always taught real explicit phonics, phonemic and graphemic awareness, and fully integrated language arts skills, the kiss of death came when legislators started micro-managing the classrooms with so-called phonics legislation. In California, a well-meaning grandmother, Mrs. Marion Josephs, was appointed to the state board and has since been annointed as the country's latest phonics guru. She openly endorses *Open Court* (now owned by McGraw Hill which, in turn, is said to be 1/4 owned by the L.A. Times) This dumbed-down program now teaches one sound for each of the letters of the alphabet in an entire first year of instruction, and then offers 100% "decodable" text. Mrs. Josephs personally micro-managed their recent emergency phonics adoption intimidating teacher-reviewers who dared to question her. LA Unified has just mandated its use. Am I surprised? Hardly! With purist whole language programs, the nation has already experienced wholesale adoption of a system of teaching reading which has crippled at least 80% of America's children if one considers what they were *capable* of learning versus what they have learned. Former Department of Justice research fellow Michael Brunner, tells the story so very well in his book, *Retarding America: The Imprisonment of Potential*, Halcyon House, Portland, Oregon. I predict that when the phony phonics doesn't work, the IRA, NCTE, and NAEYC in the state departments and colleges of education will start a new batch of reform rhetoric beginning with, "Well, we were afraid that phonics wouldn't work!" In the meantime, publishers have taken the public to the cleaners one more time.

So, how does this impact the other 29 states (the ones without statewide adoptions)? About three years ago I discovered a very interesting web site; some forty professors of linguistics, psycholinguistics, and

brain research at MIT, Harvard, and other Massachusetts universities had published correspondence to and from their state's Commissioner of Education. These professors expressed their alarm concerning the state's "reading standards" which, incidentally, are nearly a carbon copy of California's textbook selection "criteria." This criteria also seems to duplicate most of the wordage in Oregon's adoption criteria, and, in spots, it is frighteningly similar to wordage in the California Reading Task Force report whose members *thought* they had put into place the teaching of "explicit" phonics and correct spelling "to complement" the quality whole language literature the schools already owned. Ten days after I asked readers on some reading newsgroups and listservs to take a look at this site, it disappeared! Luckily I had printed a hard copy of it for my files.

In spite of Task Force demands -- and newly-enacted California legislation mandates for explicit phonics, correct spelling instruction, phonemic awareness, etc. in both curriculum and training, the State Board now offers *workbooks* and decodable text from the large publishers. Why? The State Department's "criteria" was not changed to reflect the Task Force findings as they went directly into their "adoption" year. As of this update, January, 2000, an additional emergency phonics adoption has come and gone. State Superintendent Delaine Eastin held a news conference a few days ago where it was reported that all the big publishers were smiling. No kidding! Why wouldn't they smile? They just locked in their profits for another seven years. It will be interesting to see when, if ever, the state board members will learn the technical differences between explicit and implicit phonics.

A scenario of what happened in California might play out something like this: The Task Force probably allowed the state department staff to finish the report, complete with the ambiguous wording of the final document, which matched the textbook criteria closely enough; big publishers were allowed sufficient time to throw together a couple of sight-oriented phonics and spelling workbooks -- enough to get them through the adoption process -- they hoped. The Reading Task Force report asked for the teaching of "explicit skills," **but teaching "explicit" skills (as the report called it) is not the same thing as teaching "explicit" phonics.** Did the members of this task force know this? Do state board members know this? Do they need to know it? Yes, if they truly want changes. Several Task Force members told our representative that they simply didn't really have the time to read the technical information we and others shared with them. We included our concerns regarding probable violations of federal anti-trust statutes along with the compiled phonics research. Why isn't "explicit" phonics defined in these legislative attempts to micro-manage the school systems as the compiled federal reading research defines it? *Becoming a Nation of Readers*' compilation of research was done by the leading reading professors in the U.S, not the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). Why are some professors of reading always lobbying out the correct definitions and lobbying in the scientific research exclusionary language? "Explicit" phonics says when (ahead of) the phonics must be taught and how (in isolation). We think that most everyone agrees that real "phonemic awareness" must be taught by teachers through articulation of the 42 sounds in relationships to the letters and letter combinations which represent them on paper. This must be done by both teachers (to teach) and by students (to learn); as soon as you put "phonics" drill on a worksheet, someone is trying to make it into a "visual" process only. Always keep in mind that selling printed paper is how the publishing world works. If we allow publishers and their "helpers" in the state departments, through huge conflicts of interest, to dictate what will happen in the classroom we are destined to continue to fail our children. Let us all hope that legislators are keeping track of these oversights, misdirections, and some might even say, coverups.

The consumer needs protection from monopolies in vendor goods be it arbitrarily high-priced milk, hi-tech software, or reading programs which do not work, but which are nevertheless foisted on a public which now believes they are getting some good, solid phonics instruction. They don't understand that if the texts are 100% decodable, they must ask "by what phonics base are they decodable?" If only one

sound for each of the letters of the alphabet is taught in the entire first year of instruction **[a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z]** what, of interest to the child, can be written with "decodable" text? Does the public realize that a child could not even decode "See Dick run" with that amount of too-little, too-late phonics instruction? Where, indeed, is Mr. Ralph Nader when we really need him?

If I sound like a naysayer (and of course I do), please recall that we are speaking of dire consequences -- **90 million U.S. adults reading and writing at the two lowest levels of proficiency translates to 48+% of all adults in this country) which, by some estimates equates to "functional illiteracy."!** The California State School Boards Association's central staff seems to *understand* this problem, but local California school board members have no real information. The association's staff does not print controversial information like this paper in their journal for the enlightenment of board members, state or local. The state association could have filed an injunction to either stop or delay statewide adoption until the *criteria* by which reading programs were chosen matched what the research supports, what the Task Force recommended, and the mandates of California's new legislation. The legislature, for instance, voted out invented spelling, but the criteria and the state standards still permit and even encourage it as if the legislature had never spoken on the subject. If the Food and Drug Administration were to take a similarly irresponsible path, almost certainly there would be a congressional investigation. Isn't it odd that when the federal Department of Education came into being during the Carter administration, they were specifically denied any control over curriculum. Isn't that tantamount to telling the Food and Drug Administration they could have nothing to do with foods and drugs? Federal monies, instead, are funneled through state departments where the power can, apparently, be easily manipulated for the benefit of special interests.

One very bright note: **Though actual practice is still in denial, to their great credit, the California Reading Task Force recommended that one half of the instructional day, first through third grade, be devoted to teaching nothing but reading and language arts skills.** How this miracle could possibly come about, we'll come to understand when we discuss sacred cow number four.

California's Reading Task Force:
"One-half of the instructional day -- first through third grade -- should be spent on teaching the language arts."

Several states have enacted legislation which demands the teaching of phonics. The move began about 10 years ago in Ohio when their legislature asked for "intensive" phonics. No one seems to know what "intensive" (in this context) means! Though "intensive" is synonymous with "explicit" phonics, in reality, schools could teach a couple of phonemes ahead of reading and writing, without words or pictures, and be following the exact "letter (if not the intent) of the law. This writer cautioned the public-spirited citizen who was responsible for even this much, "If you want an Orton-based program like *Spalding's Writing Road to Reading* (and he did), for starters, you should write the legislation to read: teach multi-sensory, 'explicit' phonics and then name the 'Orton' correct graphemic spelling patterns as a *minimum* phonetic requirement." Defining the words "explicit phonics" should also serve to stop the inevitable, "Gee, but we thought they meant...." Of course, we all know that something that specific could never garner the necessary votes. It would be determined as "too prescriptive."

Numerous other states have followed suit, including Washington and Oregon where legislative

committees specifically wanted a solid phonics program, but, until possibly 1999, none of which I am aware had enacted legislation which resulted in their schools actually teaching research-validated "explicit" phonics -- much less a complete, linguistically-based phonetic system which could address correct English spelling. Still, any well-meaning legislator might say, "Well, I did all I knew how to do, and if it still doesn't happen, how is that my fault?" A good point! Just maybe, though, legislators should spend a little more time on their homework, to enable themselves to "knowingly" question the parade of career educators who, with studied regularity, can be counted on to appear before them. These professors and *professional* bureaucrats lobby in the wording they want to make the impact open ended and lobby out those things which would restrict the results to what the legislation intended. The legislators are not up on the intricate technicalities of how this exact wording works when restated in adoption criteria or standards for instance. Legislators should try to keep in mind that these lobbyists are the same ones who are in charge of the current failure. When will they invite someone else (not in charge of the failure) to tell them what to do and what to think? Better, yet, they could always just unfund and unempower these state departments where most of it happens. They could opt for the principle of subsidiarity (government at its lowest possible level is the best government) and actually give control back to the local districts.

Sacred Cows Number 2 and 3
Teaching Training - Teacher Certification

Now to sacred cows number two and three -- how are teachers trained to teach reading and the language arts, with what attitudes and expectations, and by what standards are they judged to be competent to do so? These two issues cannot be separated because one group of higher educators puts the information and attitudes in, and the other regulatory group attests to the fact that what has been put in is correct and desirable. Teachers Standards and Practices Commissions then issue the teaching credential. Local board members, and school administrators (the employers, right?), again, have no control over, or even a right to question, the qualifications of applicants who have these state-granted credentials. A few years after employment, a union will protect these teachers to prevent their dismissal for incompetence. By moving from one school to another during their first years of teaching, tenure can be easily conferred on teachers who may never have had any of their students submitted to any standardized testing at all. Standardized testing is one real test of teacher competence, and often a state mandated practice. But, most states wait until grade four to test -- five years of schooling before parents can find out how their children test in comparison to classmates, and others in their school, state, and nation. In other words, teachers need not prove their competence by student outcome. You might want to review the graphic taken from *The Great American Reading Machine.* If you are interested in getting a copy of this rather remarkable book, you might write to the professor at Eastern Connecticut State College, Columbia, Connecticut.

I want to assure everyone that I consider classroom teachers to be as much victims of the sacred cow system as the children, parents, taxpayers, and anyone else involved. In no way, is all of this the fault of teachers though they seem to be "in the front row" to be blamed when things go awry. They are often castigated by parents, their principal, and each other for what is completely beyond their control. They can only teach the way they've been trained and use the curriculum they are given. Some of the braver ones I've known talk back a little or close the classroom door and teach as they please much the same as Oma Riggs did beginning in 1959 when one had to search the used book stores to find any phonics materials at all. Somewhere along the line -- through a fellow teacher, a mentor, an informative web page, or an unusual training opportunity, they happen to find methods which work with children. I talk with teachers almost daily, and they share these stories and sentiments. When they take Riggs training, their

most common comment is, "Why didn't someone teach this to me years ago? I had no idea what has been missing."

Teacher training in this country has been, in general, a subject which has caused a range of emotional response from anger and bitterness to considerable mirth even among the teacher trainees themselves. There's lots of sniggering behind hands from the rest of the world, and some outright derision for the past several decades. Lengthy books have been written on the subject. Foreigners think it very odd that we can't produce teachers who can teach our own language to our own children. But, there is little recognition that the United States' dismal standing in the international brain race in science and mathematics just might be tied to our lack of language skills. I've yet to find even a hint of that sentiment in the multitude of U.S. government and foundation educational reform reports. One reads almost incessantly about the increasing rate of teenage suicide, lack of values, bad parenting, inadequate nutrition, poverty, too much TV, lack of sleep, broken homes, rampant drug and alcohol abuse, prisons overflowing with illiterate inmates, and more recently alarming reports of horrendous school violence, etc., with not one reference tying it to the way we do, ***or do not,*** teach children to read, write and spell English. Our Institute's experience includes having one of our trainers in the next building at the exact hour a teacher and student died at the hands of three disgruntled students in Bethel, Alaska. The students had made a pact to kill everyone "who made fun of them because they couldn't read." And certainly, no one thinks to tie any of this to the way our teachers are trained by professors who themselves have little or no inkling of the phonetic structure, origin, or spelling patterns of the English lexicon.

In 1982, Dr. A. J. Mazurkiewicz found, in probably the only research ever gathered on the subject, that reading professor members of the prestigious College of Reading Association, on balance, "have little knowledge of the phonetic structure of English words." Dr. Patrick Groff reports on Mazurkiewicz's findings in his federal research synthesis, *Preventing Reading Failure: An Examination of the Myths of Reading Instruction,* Halcyon House, Portland, OR. (see our catalog) In the 1983 call-to-arms, *A Nation at Risk,* the word "reading" was mentioned but once in this prestigious panel's assessment of the overall educational failure, but not at all in their recommendation for action. I would like to visit with some of these members to find out whether the subject of "reading" was very much in their deliberations, but, somehow, just didn't end up in the printed report.

The 1983 *Nation at Risk* mentioned the word "reading" but once in that call to action! Almost 20 years later, nothing has happened to improve the situation!

Talk about monopolized "turf" protection! The Oregon Teacher's Standards and Practices Commission demands that many teachers, even those holding an MS from Johns Hopkins University, for instance, take the Oregon prescribed "reading" courses before being granted an Oregon teaching credential. This is one way to keep pertinent knowledge and better-trained teachers out of Oregon, and to ensure that our state department's "developmentally appropriate" practice "guess-as-you-go" discovery learning, and Goodman-style whole language courses will not be challenged. On the advice of the 95,000-member National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Oregon now inservices teachers *not* to answer primary-level questions, and not to present instruction directly. K-3 students teach each other in Oregon's glorified "discovery learning" atmosphere, so most of us could have predicted which way test scores are heading. It does not seem to matter that these NAEYC practices are not validated by compiled research studies.

In my seventeen years of residency in this state, I cannot recall ever reading any article in any mainstream newspaper or magazine, educational or secular, published or distributed in this state which has ever questioned any of these practices. Several years ago, I was asked to serve on a citizen's committee to keep a newly-elected state representative informed on educational issues. One education reform discussion, among the forty mostly senior-citizen committee members, found me asking, "Why don't we discuss the principle of "subsidiarity?" Not one person in the room, including the elected representative, even knew that the word, taught to me in an eighth grade civics class, differentiates between levels of government. Naturally, I wanted to to turn the discussion to consideration of more local control over important issues like textbook adoption -- such as the wisdom of local boards controlling curriculum. I was amazed that this concept was not known, but then, through some further investigation, I discovered that its meaning is no longer defined in many current dictionaries.

I am currently having an e-mail discussion with a reading professor in England who sincerely believes that we should change the English spelling system. His reasoning: "because, throughout the world, we don't all *pronounce* words alike." When I answered that "English spelling is relatively uniform throughout the world, and that perhaps we would be wise to retain one reliable means of communicating with each other," his response was that he loved "invented spelling" because it allowed children to be more creative. Yes sir, and it also misprograms the brain with the wrong information, and disallows the reading of history written in conventional English book print. Just this year (1999) in response to the phonetic information available on our web site, the Minister of Education in Bermuda had his trusted friend call me to determine what could be done about their nation's high rate of illiteracy. He told me that eleven years ago he'd been solely responsible for recommending IBM's *Writing to Read* program, a popular "invented spelling" program, and that they were now faced with a nation full of illiterate young people. IBM had no longitudinal studies to prove the efficacy of their program just as *Reading Recovery* does not -- in spite of boards buying it at a breakneck pace. We do not advocate *never* trying an innovative new program, but such programs should only be used with small numbers of children until they have been proven. They should always be carefully monitored by objective third parties (not the publisher), and they should be abandoned immediately when found not to produce the advertised results.

Sacred Cow Number 4
Time to teach what is necessary?

This brings us to cow number four - and this one will be more meaningful for those of you who are 60 + years of age. You may recall that most of you did not study science, history, geography, health, or much of anything other than language arts and math (perhaps a little music and art), in your K - 3 school years. In fact, many of you might not have even attended kindergarten in an age when mothers were considered bright enough to "do kindergarten" at home. Why didn't schools teach science, etc. in the first three grades? How did it change to what we have today? And why? I don't really know but I think it is time to ask these questions. Perhaps it was when Sputnik put legislators, publishers, and educators into a tailspin to catch up to our adversaries who had gone into space without us. Well, we've come a long way. Modern educators now think it more important to teach five-year-olds about the hole in the ozone layer and the problems of the rain forest (a slight exaggeration here to illustrate my point) almost before they've learned to pen their own name decently. It's something like the current frenzy to make our primary children "computer literate" ahead of just plain literate as in the reading, writing, and spelling of English.

Before children are developmentally ready to learn correct keyboarding (about third or fourth grade), to their great disadvantage, we waste precious teaching hours in the primary classroom, to *play* with computers -- often to practice "invented" spellings and to program our little fingers and brains with the wrong stimulus-response. And, we do these things with corporate urgings, state empowerment, funding, and, sometimes, with state department of education regulation and mandate -- not necessarily federal or local board interference. Could anyone imagine that it could be the computer companies that put these ideas into our heads? What exactly do they know about the sequencing of correct cognitive development and the many other fascinating things that contemporary brain researchers are discovering about how the human brain functions in learning?

Before the recent California Reading Task Force recommendation -- "to spend one half of the instructional day, grades one through three, on language arts instruction," -- was there any realization or discussion at all that not providing sufficient time, by itself, almost assures illiteracy for many children? Shouldn't we ask how we came to change so drastically, what was standard operating procedure in the 1940's and before? I have not investigated *how or why* these legislative changes occurred, but I think I could safely predict that an examination of the records would reveal that textbook publishing interests urging legislators to add social studies, science, and health to the K-3 curriculum caused the status quo in instructional time apportionment.

In the face of all this, we previously had Secretary of Education William Bennett and the former Republican leadership suggesting that they turn all federal educational monies over to the states. **[And, yes, this is the same William Bennett who refused to carry out the mandates of PL 99-425, 9-30-86, the "Zorinsky" legislation which ordered him to examine all published reading programs to see what they contained, how much they cost and, specifically, how they taught phonics. There were to be public hearings to receive testimony and the entire report was to be published within one year in a form understandable to the average lay person. It had passed the Congress with not one dissenting vote. To date, it has not been accomplished though there are those who would say that Marcy Stein's 1993 *Beginning Reading Instruction Study* constituted an answer. We disagree**. The money and influence funneled through the state departments of education are the *major* problem now, my friends, not problems at the federal level nor at the local board level. The four sacred cows are legislated, funded, regulated, and enforced by individual state governments. Perhaps when enough locally-elected board members are successfully taken to court by their constituencies for failing to teach their district's children to read, they will shake off their lethargy, pull themselves up by the bootstraps, and do some homework to determine what constraints caused them to abdicate their authority and responsibility in the first place. Until then, these very-much-in-place *sacred cows* will quite safely insure the continuation of our inability to teach our own language -- and, thus anything and everything else of significance -- to our own children. How very sad! Teachers and parents everywhere should rise in strong protest. They should write to the U.S. Department of Justice' Anti-Trust Division to demand a Reading-gate congressional investigation complete with grand jury, etc. Teaching *should be* the highest profession in any land for teachers must pass along the language and the culture if we are to survive as a nation.

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| Riggs Institute Home Page | Table of Contents | Catalog |

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